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Firestone Tire Fiasco May Yield Critical Auto Safety Reforms, Improve Oversight



Roy L. Oberg, The Washington Post

Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook testifies before a Senate panel investigating the Firestone tire recall. Claybrook called for an expanded recall. The tire defect has killed more than 100 people in the U.S.

Disclosure Law Closes Campaign Finance Loophole

BY STEVE WEISSMAN

A new disclosure law designed to clamp down on secretive, tax-exempt organizations that raise and spend millions of dollars to influence the outcome of elections is being hailed as a significant victory for campaign finance reformers.

The law, which is the first important campaign finance reform enacted by Congress in more than two decades, closes a tax law loophole, forcing stealth political organizations to disclose the source of their funding.

see 527 on page 12

BY JEFFREY VINSON

Twenty years ago, a massive tire recall brought one of America's oldest companies to its knees. It survived but was bought by a Japanese corporation. In August, the company found itself once again facing questions about defective tires from an outraged public and a hostile Congress.

Only this time, the tire company is not alone. Ford Motor Co. is riding shotgun.

In early August, Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. recalled 6.5 million 15-inch ATX, ATX II and Wilderness AT tires after media reports of numerous tread separations that caused catastrophic rollover crashes on Ford Explorers.

There are many parallels be-

tween this latest recall and the 1978 recall of the Firestone 500. There was a documented coverup by Firestone of the 500 defect, spurred by the lack of a Firestone replacement tire.

"But a key difference," said Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook, "is that the Firestone 500 was used on passenger cars, which rarely

see TIRE on page 4

Public Citizen Names '20,125 Questionable Doctors'; Renews Call for Opening Secret National Data Bank

BY JEFFREY VINSON

A doctor in South Carolina uses an amputated human foot to bait a crab trap. A Virginia physician artificially inseminates two women with HIV-positive semen. In New York, a doctor is criminally convicted of trying to murder his wife.

In each case, the doctor was not required to stop practicing medicine.

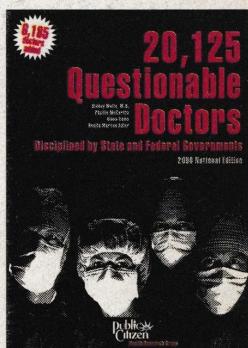
These doctors are among the U.S. doctors named in the latest edition of Public Citizen's *20,125 Questionable Doctors*, which received national attention after it was released at a Washington, D.C., news conference in August.

The invaluable consumer guide contains information about physicians who have been disciplined by state medical boards and other

agencies for incompetence, misprescribing drugs, sexual misconduct, criminal convictions, ethical lapses and other offenses. It also contains a state ranking to help citizens determine which state medical boards are doing the best job of regulating the medical profession.

Available in regional volumes or as a four-volume national set, *20,125 Questionable Doctors* provides consumers with an easily accessible compendium of physicians who have been sanctioned. A similar federal database, called the National Practitioner Data Bank, is kept secret by act of Congress.

"Choosing a doctor is one of the most critical choices consumers make," said Dr. Sidney Wolfe, di-



For more information about the 2000 edition of *Questionable Doctors*, visit www.questionabledoctors.org on the Internet.

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President's View

Elections Are Linchpin of Democracy

As you read this, the Nov. 7 election will be only days away. We have included in this issue of *Public Citizen News* a special section devoted to helping you evaluate candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. This election, like all elections, is critically important. They are the linchpin of our democracy, the purest form of accountability for our elected officials.

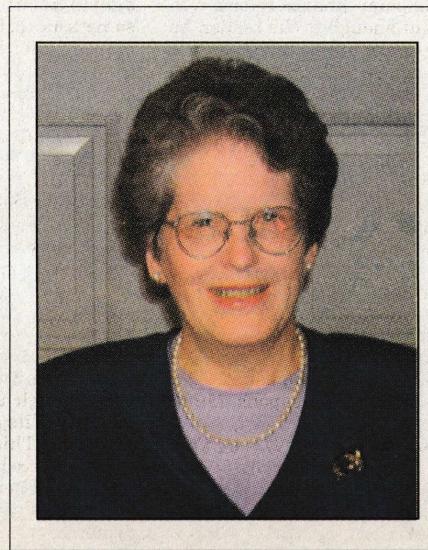
As longtime readers know, Public Citizen does not endorse candidates, not even this year when our founder, Ralph Nader, is running for president. But because we work on issues that are important to your lives, we offer our assistance in sorting through the campaign rhetoric and helping you separate fact from fiction on a handful of key issues.

Unfortunately, we still have an election system dominated by corporate cash. Both major parties continue to collect hundreds of millions of dollars in "soft money" from corporations and labor unions in a blatant evasion of federal election laws (federal law prohibits them from contributing money that goes directly to candidates).

The parties use soft money for so-called "issue ads" that really are designed to help get candidates elected. It's a money-laundering scheme that has alienated many voters, who understand that corporations are buying special deals that harm consumers. This system, which gives party leaders so much leverage over their fellow members of Congress, is partly to blame for the polarization we see today on issues of concern to average Americans. When too much power is concentrated in too few hands, the result is almost always bad for consumers.

We are working hard to change this system, and we are making progress. The beauty of our democracy, as flawed as the current system is, is that you make the ultimate decision. If a candidate is corrupted by special interest money, you hold the power to boot her or him out of office. If a candidate says one thing during the heat of the campaign and then does the opposite once in office, you can hold that politician accountable. You can see how your senators and representative voted on campaign finance reform in our vote chart beginning on page 7.

As you ponder your choices, I urge you to



consider the role of government in our lives. Some candidates believe the federal government should take a strong role in protecting consumers from the hard knocks of our free enterprise system, that we should have strong health, safety and environmental standards and broad citizen access to the legal system. Others say we should put our trust in the inherent powers of the marketplace and in private companies to do the right thing.

For two decades now, beginning with President Reagan and his mantra of "getting government off your back," Corporate America has waged an intensive and sustained campaign to reduce the role of government in regulating commerce and to reverse many of the gains of the 1960s and 1970s, when the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and other health and safety programs were born.

This multibillion-dollar industry effort has been only partly successful. But each year, Public Citizen and other progressive organizations fight to protect these programs and to ensure that citizens can hold corporations accountable in court.

The recent recall of 6.5 million Firestone tires dramatically illustrates the need for a strong regulatory system. I headed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) during the Carter administration from 1977 to 1981. When Reagan arrived, the agency's budget was slashed in half.

Today, it still spends only about two-thirds, in inflation-adjusted dollars, of what it did in my last year. We had many programs and rules that were cut, and the agency was left in a weaker state. Now we find that NHTSA has neither the tools nor the statutory authority to properly police the automobile industry. As a result, more than 150 people around the world have been killed by defective Firestone tires, many of them on Ford Explorers. We have no standards to prevent auto companies from selling vehicles that roll over, as Explorers and other sport utility vehicles tend to do. Our tire safety standard is 32 years old.

This is what happens when we "get government off your back." As I write to you, Public Citizen is working day and night to get remedial legislation passed before Congress adjourns.

Without strong oversight, Firestone and Ford hid the truth from the government for years while innocent people were dying. With billions of dollars at stake, how can we trust HMOs or pharmaceutical companies to do what is in the best interest of citizens?

We face clear choices of philosophies about the role of government. For instance, should a guaranteed prescription drug benefit for seniors be provided directly through the Medicare program? Or, as our opponents argue, should the government encourage HMOs and private insurers to provide such coverage? Should patients who are denied treatment by their HMOs have the right to take their cases to court? We say yes. But many candidates in this election defend the current legal immunity enjoyed by this industry.

I urge you to ask the tough questions. Listen carefully to the details of the candidates' proposals, not just the 30-second sound bites. And finally, on Nov. 7, vote your conscience.

Joan Claybrook is president of Public Citizen.

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Public Citizen is a national nonprofit membership organization based in Washington, D.C. Since its founding by Ralph Nader in 1971, Public Citizen has fought for corporate and government accountability in order to guarantee the individual's right to safe products, a healthy environment and workplace, fair trade, and clean and safe energy sources. Public Citizen is active in every public forum: Congress, the courts, government agencies, and the news media.

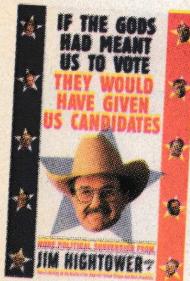
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Recommended Reading

President NOTA? Under Siege



If The Gods Had Meant Us To Vote They Would Have Given Us Candidates

Jim Hightower, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., \$25.00

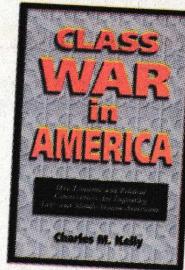
"Every time I see Tom DeLay, I can't help but thinking: a hundred thousand sperm and *you* were the fastest?" writes Jim Hightower in this irreverent indictment of the American electoral system. The elections in 2000 are the backdrop upon which Hightower develops his thesis: our conventional wisdom of a two-party system and free elections bear revisiting.

"THE BIG STORY missing from the media's election coverage" is that "the fastest-growing party in America is not the Republicans or the Democrats but the NOTA party — the *None of the above* Party." In this assertion, Hightower cites evidence that nonvoting eligible voters have climbed from 58 percent (1994) to 64 percent (1998).

Whether the winner in November belongs to any party is largely irrelevant, says Hightower, the noted Texas populist and radio personality. The winner is the moneyed corporate plutocracy that hedged its bets, bankrolling each of the leading candidates. Its access is assured because 96 percent of Americans donate no money to national political candidates "and find themselves effectively shut out of economic and political decision making." In this respect, elections are not free; unregulated soft money fuels a corporate legislative agenda (read: greed) frequently at odds with the aspirations of working Americans.

If The Gods Had Meant Us To Vote ...names plenty of names. It is replete with anecdotes and an A-to-Z glossary ("Beelzebub's Buzzwords") of political corruption. But all is not lost. Hightower also offers hopeful examples where the almighty dollar is not an insurmountable obstacle — where common sense and grassroots successes prevail, where it is still "an exciting time to be an American."

— THOMAS SEIDMAN



Class War in America: How Economic and Political Conservatives Are Exploiting Low- and Middle-Income Americans

Charles M. Kelly, Fithian Press, \$15.95

Conservatives, as a matter of policy and strategy, are waging financial warfare against working-class Americans, asserts Charles M. Kelly in his new book *Class War in America*. Over the past 20 years, they have waged a successful war while "our country has drifted much too far toward what is commonly thought to be the economic strategies of America's financial conservatives" during the Reagan, Bush and Clinton administrations, Kelly says.

Class War in America shines a light on the conservative establishment's efforts to benefit corporations, executives and investors at the expense of the lower- and middle-income workers.

Kelly's book is meant to be a wake-up call for anyone who has not noticed this assault on American workers. And for those who are already concerned about the problem, Kelly takes the reader on a guided tour of the conservative strategy and uses the conservative press — *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *Barron's* and *Business Week* — to document his findings.

Closed Minds



Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at the Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System That Shapes Their Lives

Jeff Schmidt, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., \$26.95

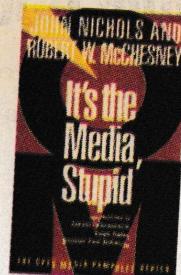
Professionals within our society are considered the most able, those who make things happen. But as Jeff Schmidt notes in his book *Disciplined Minds*, these over-trained doers are really just products of what corporate America is looking for — people who will do the job as trained without challenging the system.

Schmidt focuses on the idea that not only do employers look for people who are technically trained but also people who are trained to go with the flow without rocking the boat or questioning authority.

Written for professionals and students looking to become professionals themselves, *Disciplined Minds* provides an insight into a world where creative minds are subdued. Through first- and second-hand experience, Schmidt analyzes the true meaning of being a professional and the sacrifices that professionals make to achieve their career goals. He challenges them to think outside the box, use their intuition and their attitude to provide for a better society.

— CARRIE CRYSTAL VAN DRIEL

Media Moguls



It's the Media, Stupid

John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney, Seven Stories Press, \$10.00

The current U.S. media system, which is dominated by fewer than 10 transnational conglomerates with revenues that range from roughly \$8 billion to \$30 billion per year, is "a poison pill for democracy," argue John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney in their new book *It's the Media, Stupid*.

The book, which includes an introduction written by Ralph Nader, shows how community journalism has given way to corporate journalism, where the media system exists to maximize returns to shareholders and rake in profits.

It's the Media, Stupid proposes making the media system more responsive to the needs of citizens and less dominated by the needs of Wall Street and Madison Avenue. The authors also present their strategy for creating a media reform movement that will push for more funding for public-service broadcasting and anti-trust protections to limit the amount of media owned by one firm.

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